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Fred Thompson's remarks to the NRA's "Celebration of American Values" Conference in Washington, DC

MR. THOMPSON: Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. I appreciate it. I'm glad you finally got that video up. The -- oh, I'll say it. All you young men out there with a full head of hair, enjoy it while you can.

Thank you, Wayne. Thank you all. I appreciate you inviting me here today, and I've seen your agenda and the number of politicians that you're going to be listening to. And I don't know whether to admire you for your stamina or compliment you on your being such a glutton for punishment -- but I'm glad you included me in the mix.

My relationship with you folks can be summed up very shortly. Check the record. That's about all I probably need to say. But having rejoined the ranks of the politicians again, obviously that's not all I'm going to say. But I do remember a relationship from way back, from the time that Charlton Heston came to Tennessee in 1994, and I formed a friendship with that great American and watched him hobble across the state with me on a bad hip and go through pain to help me win my first election in the United States Senate.

I think back to the time that I had -- for a while I had a skeet shoot there in Nashville, many of you know of. I met some of you there for the first time. We raised a little money for juvenile diabetes, and then, of course, your support for me for United States Senate and my support for the Second Amendment, as I said I would do when I went to the United States Senate.

I never subscribed to the notion that it made our country safer by infringing on the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding citizens. I think back to the A rating I got from this organization and the endorsements that I was proud to receive. So it's not just a matter of promises made, as far as I'm concerned. It's a matter of commitments that have been kept.

But you know, sometimes when the stage gets a little larger, the voices get a little weaker. My first trip to New Hampshire after I announced my candidacy, I went to a gun store. When I was in Florida just last week, I went to a gun show right before the UT-Florida football game. I should have stayed at the gun show.

But it's not because I hang out there every day. It's because I wanted to demonstrate something that I think is important: that I will say the same things that I've been saying since 1994, and that what I say in New Hampshire, I will say in Florida and all parts in between. My philosophy does not depend on my geography, and I thought it was time I laid down that marker early on.

But we're here today not just because of our support of the Second Amendment. We're here today for our support for the rest of the Constitution and what I call the first principles that this country was founded upon. Now, these first principles have to do with human nature. They have to do with the wisdom of the ages and they have to do with the notion that there's some things that don't change in this changing world that we live in.

It's given us the Declaration of Independence, which reminds us, if we need reminding, that our basic rights come from God and not from government. It's given us the Constitution of the United States. Thank you. Thank you.

It's given us the Constitution of the United States, which divides power, based on the notion that it's not good to put too much power in too few hands. And it divides it not only at the federal level but between the federal and the state level, based on the notion that all solutions to all problems are not found in Washington, DC.

That, in turn, is based upon the idea of the eternal truth that this country was founded upon, and that's the idea of freedom -- individual freedom, political freedom, economic freedom -- and the fact that all those things are tied together. And it's also based upon the knowledge that we have that if a government's big and powerful enough to give you anything, it is big and powerful enough to take anything away from you. And we reject that kind of government in this country.

And there were those first principles that allowed a fellow like me to get in his truck and go from one end of the state to the other. Started 20 points down, wound up 20 points ahead on Election Night. Won a state by 20 points two different elections, 20 points each, in a state that Bill Clinton carried twice. Talking about lower taxes, talking about less regulation, talking about the importance of the sanctity of life, talking about competition among free people in that free marketplace, talking about the importance of trade, and how if we adhered to those principles, we'd remain the most prosperous country in the history of the world; and not only for us, but to set an example for everybody else in the world, or any other country that applied those principles and a little dose of rule of law, and it's almost guaranteed economic success for any nation that's ever tried it anywhere in the world.

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Amendment. It was not because back in those days I was thinking about running for president. I think my history shows that I'm not standing here before you as somebody who has craved that office ever since I was a junior in high school. That's not been the case. I'm simply another American in another American story, like many of you out here, who looks down the road a little bit, is concerned about his country in the future, realizes there's going to be some decisions on the next president's plate's going to determine our future and the future of our children and grandchildren for many years to come.

That's hit home more to me than ever in the last few years. I have been blessed in many ways in my life -- some of them have come a little later in life instead of a little sooner, and a couple of them are sitting at home now, waiting on me to get back, ages 4 and 11 months, and I'm proud to have my wife and their mother with me here tonight, Jeri Thompson. Thank you for being here tonight -- today.

She wanted to know -- you to know that she is supportive, also. And we just came off the campaign trail, got in late last night, but she wanted to be here today. And I don't know, but I think she'd make a much better first lady than Bill Clinton. What do you think?

But we have been successful as a nation, and we ought to be proud of that fact. We shouldn't be ashamed of it. We've taken a lot of criticism around the world, but I always think of the proposition that I live in a country that's shed more blood for other people's liberty than all the other countries in the world, and there's no reason to apologize to the United States of America. We are steeped in the tradition of honor and sacrifice for the greater good in this nation. We are proud of that heritage.

And our country and these challenges that are going to be facing us in the near future needs a leader who stands by the principles that has made us a great nation, that understands this nation, understands her people, understands the greatness of America's past, but more importantly understands the greatness of America's future. My friends, I submit to you, I am that man. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Now, they tell me we've still got time for questions and answers, because I got a couple of questions.

Go ahead.

MODERATOR: We submitted some questions from the members.

Some have argued that the Second Amendment means different things in different places, that it's okay for New York City or Chicago to impose more restrictions on gun owners' rights than it is in Tennessee or Montana. Do you agree with that view?

MR. THOMPSON: Nope.

I would only point out that it's more than coincidental that so many places that have such high crime rates have the toughest gun restrictions in America. That's more than a coincidence.

MODERATOR: What is your position on gun shows?

MR. THOMPSON: Well, just having come from one ... No, I -- I enjoy gun shows. I think that they're a part of Americana. I don't know that anybody would be against gun shows. There are various kinds of regulations and proposals that would restrict private citizens who are not professional dealers or anything like that and place rules on them as they go there. I've always been against that.

We have had, you know, over my years in the Senate all kinds and any kind, as you well know, over the eight years I was there restrictions on Second Amendment rights of one kind or another, and the -- those who would do that try to pick the most vulnerable areas, try to pick the high-profile areas, try to single out some little something and embarrass somebody with it. And gun shows have been the easy target for that, but I've always resisted that and would continue to do so.

MODERATOR: If elected president, will you support positions of the Bush administration that the Second Amendment protects an individual right to keep and bear arms and appoint an attorney general who does as well?

MR. THOMPSON: Yes, I think -- I think we're winning on the interpretation of the Second Amendment. I've always taken the position that -- kind of a complicated position that I've worked out.

The Constitution means what it says, and the -- seems to me that the old militia debate that's been going on some time is not only being rejected in the courts but it's being rejected by scholars, who are not necessarily traditional friends of Second Amendment rights.

But the Constitution does mean what it says, and it's not restricted to protection of militias. Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure being with you. Thank you.

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